

# SUN 27 APR 90 Welcome eulogized for leading the way

By C. Fraser Smith

Her maiden name was Freeman, a somewhat mocking reminder that life for black American women and men was less than fully free, but her life was devoted to changing the reality.

In Baltimore and Annapolis, she was known to the political world as Verda.

She became the first black woman state senator in the United States when she was elected to the Maryland Senate in 1962, beating the machine politicians who thought they ruled the old 4th District in West Baltimore.

From then on her name became official — and historic: Sen. Verda F. Welcome.

Yesterday, friends and colleagues held a celebration of her life at Grace Presbyterian Church in Northwest Baltimore. More than 400 people crowded into the sunlit sanctuary to hear again the exploits of a pioneer — a woman whose victory had dramatically changed the attitudes of black Marylanders about their government.

Mrs. Welcome, who had kept office hours until very near the end of her life, died Sunday at the age of 83. She had served in the Maryland House of Delegates from 1958 to 1962 and in the Senate from 1963 to 1982.

A long list of her political beneficiaries paid tribute yesterday.

"Because Verda was, I am," said state Sen. Clarence W. Blount, D-Baltimore. A generation of political leaders in Maryland, he said, owe a debt to her determination.

"I don't think the population at large could really understand what she went through. There was no book to follow, no one to say, 'Come



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The late senator's grandson, Gregory Mercer, and her daughter, Mary Sue Welcome, talk with Councilwoman Jacqueline F. McLean.

hand to those of us who followed her."

Sen. Paul S. Sarbanes, D-Md., recalled working as a precinct captain in her first, history-making campaign, a campaign he remembers as making "a tremendous difference to us all."

"There are countless numbers of men and women, young boys and girls, who are leading lives of dignity and respect today because of her val-

As a young man untutored and untested in politics, Representative Kweisi Mfume, D-Md.-7th, said he recalls looking to Mrs. Welcome for guidance.

"I held and hold Verda in awe because of what she had done and what she represented," he said.

Former Gov. Harry R. Hughes, once a colleague of Mrs. Welcome in the state Senate, recalled years of

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turmoil and change during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. Together, he said, they "shared" very bitter, not very pleasant battles."

What he remembered most, he said, was "a genuineness and a respect for others. She really was a gentle, loving person."

Another Senate colleague, Sen. Julian L. Lapidus, D-Baltimore, said: "I loved her commitment to civil rights, I loved her kindness to everyone. I loved her whoops of joy when something pleased her. I loved her tears of sorrow when justice was not done. I loved her."

Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski, D-Md., said she and Senator Welcome had talked about their designations as "first women" to be elected to a state or to the U.S. Senate. Ms. Mikulski was the first woman elected in her own right to the U.S. Senate.

The history might well have been different, Ms. Mikulski said.

Had the national Voting Rights Act of 1964 come earlier, had the one-person, one-vote court rulings come earlier, Senator Mikulski said, the first U.S. senator in the history of the United States to be elected in her own right might well have been named Verda and not Barbara.

"That would have been all right with me," Ms. Mikulski said.

Speaker after speaker said Mrs. Welcome's interest and encouragement kept them moving in politics or in life.

Baltimore Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke, one of several politicians who claimed the title "one of Verda's boys," said it was she who first told him during his race for state's attorney in 1982, "You will win!"

"It electrified me. It was the first time anyone had said that," the mayor recalled.

The mayor and others said Mrs. Welcome profoundly impressed them with her lifelong commitment to public service — something she demanded of her proteges and to a belief that political service can be honorable and effective.

Enolla P. McMillan, president of the Baltimore branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, said, "In these days when integrity is pushed to the back burner, we could certainly use more people like Verda." The best memorial to her work, she said, would be adoption of her values.

Delegate Howard P. Rawlings, D-Baltimore, another of her "boys," assured Mrs. McMillan that the lessons of his mentor had been learned and would be honored.